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US MILITARY ACADEMY GRADUATE GURJIWAN SINGH CHAHAL AT THE CLASS OF 2021 GRADUATION CEREMONY AT WEST POINT, NEW YORK ON MAY 22, 2021. CHAHAL WAS AMONG THE FIRST TWO OBSERVANT TURBANED SIKH MEN TO ENROL AND GRADUATE FROM THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS MILITARY ACADEMY. PHOTO: TIMOTHY A CLARY / AFP

Identity

Sikh Americans In the US Military Are Still Fighting to Keep Their Turbans and Beards

"That day at the academy, as I stood outside the barbershop, I felt like I was betraying my upbringing. I didn't want to look into the mirror for months."

By Pallavi Pundir
JAKARTA, ID

18 October 2021, 5:32pm

Ever since he was a kid, Simratpal Singh was fascinated by the military. His great-grandfather served in the British Indian Army in colonial India, and fought in World War I. Singh, born in the north Indian state of

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But there was something missing.

“I didn’t know what it meant for someone like me to be in the U.S. military,” Singh, now 33 and a major in the U.S. Army, told VICE. “Sikhs were just not visible in the forces.”

Still, he decided to chase his dream. In 2006, he joined the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York – a four-year federal service academy that is the country’s most prestigious military university. But during the academy’s orientation session, a major raised a concern about his beard and turban.

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MANISHA KRISHNAN

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“I was shocked. I grew up with this history of the rich Sikh military traditions across the world,” he said. “The idea that my Sikh identity would be an issue was bizarre.”

SIMRATPAL SINGH IS ONE OF THE FIRST SIKH AMERICANS TO HAVE WON THE RIGHT TO WEAR HIS FAITH WHILE ON DUTY IN THE U.S. ARMY. PHOTO COURTESY: SIKH COALITION

This was post-9/11 U.S., when American fundamentalists were routinely targetting minority Sikhs. At the time, an analysis showed that most Americans viewed Sikhs in connection to "terrorism," "9/11" and "Islam," or framed within tragic events. Surveys have revealed that Americans often perceive a "terrorist" to be a person with brown skin, wearing clothing seen as foreign.

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In 1981, a policy change by the Pentagon banned observant Sikhs in the U.S. military from wearing articles of faith such as beard, long hair and turban – which are otherwise customary in Sikhism. "I grew up in a household where we believe in losing our heads but not giving up our values and principles," said Singh.

> **Surveys have revealed that Americans often perceive a "terrorist" to be a person with brown skin, wearing clothing seen as foreign. For young Sikhs like Simratpal Singh, it was not just important to turn the narrative; it was necessary.**

"That day at the academy, as I stood outside the barbershop, I felt like I was betraying this upbringing. My 18-year-old identity was shattered. I didn't want to look into the mirror for months. But I resolved to make this right."

Nearly a decade later, in 2016, Singh went to court to be able to serve with his articles of faith intact, leading to a landmark ruling that, today, allows all Army personnel to openly observe their religion. In 2020, the U.S. Air Force updated its dress code policy to be more inclusive, too.

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Singh's case is one of the first in a long struggle of inclusivity and diversity within the U.S. military.

But it's not the last.

In April this year, First Lieutenant Sukhbir Singh Toor became the latest in the long-running conflict.

Toor is the first Sikh in the Marine Corps – a 246-year-old branch of the military – to request religious accommodation.

FIRST LIEUTENANT SUKHBIR SINGH TOOR IS THE FIRST SIKH IN THE MARINE CORPS TO REQUEST PERMANENT RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION. PHOTO COURTESY: SIKH COALITION

American society, including the military, goes back to over 100 years. A current estimate puts Sikhs wearing turbans and beards in the U.S. Army and Air Force to about 100.

> **In April this year, First Lieutenant Sukhbir Singh Toor became the latest in the long-running conflict. Toor is the first Sikh in the Marine Corps – a 256-year-old branch of the military – to request religious accommodation.**

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The son of Indian immigrants, Singh sought help from the Sikh Coalition, an American civil rights group that was formed on the night of 9/11. The organisation has been spearheading campaigns for inclusivity in various fields, including the U.S. military since 2009. The organisation had also represented Simratpal Singh, among at least 20 other observant Sikh officers.

allowing him to wear articles of faith on ordinary duty, but refused to let him wear a turban during ceremonial duties.

VICE reached out to the Marine Corps for comment. They acknowledged receipt of the email but did not respond to VICE's questions.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, the Corps' spokeswoman Colonel Kelly Frushour said that "uniformity" is important to create team bonds, which helps squads in combat environments. "Marines represent the entirety of the Marine Corps," she said. "Therefore, we strive to present a neutral image to the public."

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For Toor, it wasn't enough.

When VICE reached out to the Sikh Coalition, the group directed this writer to a statement, wherein Toor said he has proven his commitment to excel in the Marine Corps, and defend the country.

while continuing my career of service," said Toor in the statement. In an interview with NY *Times*, Toor expressed his desire to commit to two things he cherishes the most: his faith and his country.

Bombing Aftermath, I Wished I Kept My Turban

GIAN SINGH SANDHU

06.05.18

"We've come a long way, but there is still more to go," he told the NY *Times*. "The Marine Corps needs to show it really means what it has been saying about strength in diversity – that it doesn't matter what you look like, it just matters that you can do your job."

> **"The Marine Corps needs to show it really means what it has been saying about strength in diversity – that it doesn't matter what you look like, it just matters that you can do your job," said First Lt Toor in an *NY Times* interview.**

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Amandeep Singh Sidhu, a partner at American law firm Winston & Strawn who is also a legal advisory board member of the Sikh Coalition and Toor's

Toor has now appealed the Corps' decision. "We made very clear to the Marine Corps about what we want," said Sidhu, "If we're not able to resolve those remaining concerns, we will have no choice but to go to the federal court and ask a judge to rule."

Though VICE wasn't able to speak with Toor since he is currently on active duty, Sidhu said both he and Toor are optimistic about where this case will head.

> **"We made very clear to the Marine Corps about what we want. If we're not able to resolve those remaining concerns, we will have no choice but to go to the federal court and ask a judge to rule," said Amandeep Singh Sidhu, Toor's advocate.**

"What we've been able to achieve in 2016 in the Army, will repeat itself with the Marine Corps in 2021," said Sidhu. He said that legal campaigns of the past carried out by African American communities, women and the LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. military served as powerful legal precedents while fighting for Sikh officers.

"We are very respectful of the concerns of the U.S. military, and of their history and traditions. But we also knew we could prove them wrong."

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AMANDEEP SINGH SIDHU, A PARTNER AT WINSTON & STRAWN AND A LEGAL ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER OF THE SIKH COALITION, IS HELPING MANY YOUNG SIKH OFFICERS SUCH AS TOOR TO FIGHT THEIR CASE. PHOTO COURTESY: SIKH COALITION

rules and regulations.

NY Times reported that among 180,000 active-duty Marines, there have been only 33 applications for exceptions to uniform regulations on religious grounds. Before Toor, no one was allowed to grow a beard or don headgear.

"The Marine Corps wants to hold on to their traditions because that's how they see an American soldier: someone with a shaved beard and tight haircut," said Singh, who is currently serving as a professor of economics and finance at the U.S. Military Academy. "But that's not representative of America. Generational trends change. The Marine Corps is stuck behind times."

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TESS OWEN

08.09.18

For the 500,000 Sikh Americans — an estimate by the Sikh Coalition – visibility has always been fraught. Advocacy groups have been fighting to address systemic hate against non-white communities such as Sikhs, and change perceptions around them. Even in 2021, studies show that Sikhs continue to be looked at as "foreign," "automatically suspect" and "potentially terrorist" in the U.S, or misrepresented in popular culture.

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"When I looked at visibility in the military, law enforcement, or any positions of power or authority, there are so few Sikhs in the U.S., unlike India, the UK or even Canada. Quite frankly, my peers in India scratch their heads and ask, 'Why is it taking the U.S. so long?'" said Sidhu.

> **“automatically suspect” and “potentially terrorist” in the U.S, or misrepresented in popular culture.**

But wins are important to highlight, too. Earlier this year, pictures of Second Lt Gurjiwan Singh Chahal graduating from the U.S. Military Academy went viral among South Asians and its diaspora. He was among the first two observant turbaned Sikh men to enrol and graduate from the academy.

Another Sikh, Gurchetan Singh, became the first to join the Air National Guard force of the U.S. Air Force with his faith intact in 2019. He told VICE in an email statement that he’s grateful to have joined at a time like this. “No American should have to choose between their religion and their career,” he said.

Guard with a religious accommodation waiver.

Brig. Gen. Jeremy Horn (Boss, Washington ANG) administered the oath.

Next step: Basic Training at Lackland AFB, Texas. 🤙

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The hope, Sidhu added, is that these wins will chip away at the stereotypes and assumptions around Sikhs. “It might be naive but I’m optimistic that the world will become a better place for my daughters and the younger generation. Perhaps they wouldn’t face the stereotypes, bigotry and racism that my generation, or that of my parents’, navigated.”

> **the younger generation. Perhaps they wouldn't face the stereotypes, bigotry and racism that we navigated."**

Sidhu said it's frustrating to start from scratch with each case. But he's hopeful.

"I think we're at the tail end of the campaign," he said. "We may not need to go to court to see this change happen. But we will if we have to. As of now, the Marines are on the wrong side of history."

Follow Pallavi Pundir on Twitter.

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